

VZCZCXRO0515
PP RUEHPB
DE RUEHLO #0580 0641139
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051139Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1637
INFO RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 0272
RUEHSV/AMEMBASSY SUVA PRIORITY 0029
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0854
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 000580

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2019

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SUBJECT: COMMONWEALTH ISSUES STRONG STATEMENT ON FIJI AFTER
MINISTERIAL MEETING

REF: WELLINGTON 55

Classified By: Political Counselor Richard Mills, reasons 15. (b/d).

11. (SBU) The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) issued a strongly-worded statement following a March 4 meeting in London, stating it "deplored" Fiji's "contravention" of the Commonwealth's democratic principles, non-adherence to previous Commonwealth calls to hold elections by March 2009, and the Interim Government's refusal to announce alternative election dates. The CMAG, which is charged with determining punitive measures for member states that do not uphold the Commonwealth's democratic values, also decided that Fiji would be suspended from the Commonwealth at the CMAG's next meeting in September 2009 if it does not make sufficient progress consistent with the benchmarks set out in the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Communique. The CMAG also expressed its support for the joint Commonwealth-UN mediation, reiterating that the process should be "independent, inclusive, time-bound, and without prejudice to outcome."

12. (C) London-based New Zealand diplomat Jake Collins told poloff March 5 that New Zealand Foreign Minister McCully pressed for Fiji's "full and immediate suspension" at the March 4 CMAG meeting, in line with the Commonwealth's Millbank Principles that call for members' full suspension if no progress toward a return to democracy has been made two years after a coup. (NOTE: Fiji's voting rights in the Commonwealth were suspended in December 2006 when the coup took place. END NOTE.) Collins explained that some representatives at the CMAG meeting thought the Commonwealth should stay in line with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which in a January statement called for progress toward a return to democracy by May 1. Collins said McCully pressed for a special CMAG meeting to convene shortly after the PIF deadline, but that some members preferred to take a final decision on Fiji's suspension at the regularly scheduled September CMAG meeting in New York on the margins of UNGA. Collins noted that the CMAG's statement did allow for another meeting before September, but he thought it was unlikely. Given Fiji military leader Voreqe Bainimarama's harsh criticism March 5 of the Commonwealth statement, Collins expected that Fiji's full suspension would come in September. In the meantime, New Zealand continues to support the joint Commonwealth-UN mediation efforts.

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